

Red squirrel

Tamiasciurus hudsonicus By Niall G. Clancy

It was the first day of deer season, and I was waiting about 100 yards from a game trail where I'd seen a nice white-tail buck the previous year. After an hour or so, I heard a small branch break. My heart pounding, I lifted my rifle, hoping to see the deer. Then I heard that incessant *chirp chirp chirp chirp* familiar to all forest hunters. A red squirrel that didn't want me in its territory had busted my hiding spot. I threw the little noisemaker a nasty look before moving on. The squirrel kept chattering away and flapping its tail until I was out of sight.

IDENTIFICATION

Montana is home to only two native tree squirrels: the northern flying squirrel and the red squirrel (also known as the pine squirrel). The two other squirrels found here—the eastern fox and eastern gray—are non-natives that moved west from other states in recent decades. Red squirrels and flying squirrels generally live in coniferous forests. Gray squirrels show up mostly in city neighborhoods. Fox squirrels reside mainly along river bottoms and some city parks in the state's southeastern quarter.

Most red squirrels are red gray or red brown. Some are dark red brown and look almost black in dense, shaded forests. All red squirrels have a white underbelly and distinct white eye ring. Fox and gray squirrels are much larger and slightly lighter in color. Flying squirrels are similar to red squirrels in color but are largely nocturnal and have noticeable patagia—the parachute-like membranes that allow them to glide. Red squirrels are primarily active during the day.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Red squirrels live throughout the Rocky Mountains, as well as the northern Midwest and East. In Montana, they are absent only

from the state's northeastern quadrant.

In western Montana, red squirrels mainly live in ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests as well as stands of subalpine Engelmann spruce. In eastern Montana, they stick mainly to dry ponderosa pine forests but also thrive in urban settings where invasive fox squirrels are not present.

FEEDING

Red squirrels are opportunistic feeders that consume tree buds, flowers, mushrooms, berries, pine seeds, and even bird eggs and small nestlings. In the fall, they clip green pinecones from trees and store them in one or more large caches for winter access. Usually, some cones go uneaten and sprout into saplings. Because of this, red squirrels play an important ecological role in pine tree propagation.

While it forages over a large area, a red squirrel usually returns to a single tree before eating. A large pile of pine cones, scales, and seeds, known as a "midden," accumulates at this site, often growing over multiple squirrel generations.

LIFE CYCLE

Red squirrels mate from March through June, with several males battling over a female. After a one-month gestation, she gives birth in a woodpecker cavity or a nest of grasses and sticks nestled within a tree hollow or branches. The average litter of three kits is born hairless and blind. The mother nurses the kits for about two months before urging them to move out of the nest. Young squirrel mortality is high, with 75 percent perishing in their first year. Those that survive their first few years have long life spans relative to other squirrel species. In the

wild, red squirrels live five years on average and have been documented living as long as a decade.

TERRITORIAL BEHAVIOR

Red squirrels are highly territorial—a behavior that ensures the species' survival. They fiercely defend one- to six-acre territories that have the best food sources, forcing intruders to relocate elsewhere. At 18 months, juvenile squirrels leave their mother and either find an unoccupied territory or fight to take over an occupied one.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The red squirrel is one of the most common small mammals in Montana. Populations appear to be doing well. Though it is legal to hunt them, few people do. Those interested in squirrel meat pursue the larger and better tasting fox or gray squirrels. 🐿️



SCIENTIFIC NAME

Tamiasciurus comes from the Greek words for "storer," "shade," and "tail." *Hudsonicus* refers to Hudson Bay, Canada, where in 1777 the first red squirrel specimens were obtained for scientific study.